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SUBJECT: RAMON ON CONVERGENCE AND ILLEGAL OUTPOSTS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

1. (C) Minister of Justice Haim Ramon told the Ambassador May 16 that his government will "sincerely" try to work with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmud Abbas until at least the end of the year, before deciding, if this effort fails, to implement convergence. Ramon admitted that through negotiations with a partner the Israelis might concede more land than they would do through the independent action anticipated by the convergence plan. Without a partner, however, Ramon said, "convergence is the only game in town," because by passively maintaining the status quo the GOI will significantly increase Israel's vulnerability to "the terrorist and demographic threats." "We've got a good case," Ramon said. "We're not increasing the occupation, we're pulling back and hopefully turning this dispute into one merely of borders." Ramon claimed that Abbas may respond to Israeli attempts to work with him by seeking to skip to the final phase of the road map, and by focusing on politically loaded issues such as the release of some Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. The Israelis will not accept these demands, Ramon insisted. Ramon noted that, regardless of their progress with Abbas, GOI officials will begin providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians by delivering in-kind assistance (goods), but not cash.

2. (C) Ramon said that a special committee is currently thinking through various options for the GOI in the West Bank after convergence, including being open to creating a substantial Jordanian border passage ("like Rafah") in the Jordan Valley. He said that the passage arrangements might include Israeli and even third party observers. Ramon said that it is too early to decide whether or not to destroy West Bank settlements after Israel vacates them, but he stressed that the GOI will retain west of the separation barrier major settlement blocks such as Maale Adumim and Ariel, which he claimed comprise approximately one percent of land in the West Bank. The Ambassador noted that even one percent could inhibit north-south movement for Palestinians, insisting that "reduction of obstacles to movement is one of our highest priorities." Ramon defended inclusion of Ariel by arguing that it would become like a "balloon on a string" (i.e. the fence would protect both sides of the road leading to Ariel) and that tunnels under the "string" would allow N/S movement. On Maale Adumim, Ramon explained that the GOI plans to construct a north-south highway for the Palestinians in the E-1, Maale Adumim area at a cost of approximately one quarter of a billion dollars. Ramon also said that as part of its aim to complete construction of the separation barrier by year's end, changes in the barrier's route could reduce the number of Palestinians west of the barrier from their current level of approximately 6,000, under the existing route plan, to between approximately 2,000 and 3,000. (Note: He freely acknowledged that this estimate does not include Palestinians living in Jerusalem. End note.)

3. (C) Ramon said that he will move legislation forward to expedite the removal of illegal outposts. Firm action on the illegal outposts, Ramon explained, forms part of the GOI plan to garner international support for the convergence plan. He claimed that he will tell settler leaders who oppose this action, "I have no power to compromise because we made a promise to the Americans. I can only present compromise proposals to the U.S. government, and it is up to them to decide." He mentioned that he will chair a government committee that he intends to use to make it more difficult to build new outposts.

4. (C) Other issues covered in the meeting, including trafficking in persons, Magen David Adom, intellectual property rights, and nationality and entry, are covered in septels.

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JONES